

Message Text

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ACTION EA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 AID-05 USIE-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00

PM-03 H-01 INR-07 L-02 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 RSC-01

PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 OMB-01 DPW-01 EB-07 IO-10 /085 W

----- 113722

R 311202Z JAN 75

FM AMEMBASSY SAIGON

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 2401

INFO AMCONSUL BIEN HOA

AMCONSUL CAN THO

AMCONSUL NHA TRANG

AMCONSUL DANANG

CINCPAC

USDEL JEC PARIS

AMEMBASSY BONN

AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS

AMEMBASSY CANBERRA

AMEMBASSY DUBLIN

AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE

AMEMBASSY ROME

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 SAIGON 1231

DEPT PASS IMMEDIATE TO IBS/NCA

CINCPAC FOR POLAD

ROME FOR ILLING

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT VS

SUBJ: FATHER THANH: GOING DOWNHILL

REF: (A) SAIGON 15412 (1974); SAIGON 820 (1975)

1. SUMMARY. FR TRAN HUU THANH MAY BE NEARING THE END OF
THE ROAD. HE HAS NOT LATELY ATTEMPTED TO LEAD DEMONSTRATIONS
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AND APPEARS INCREASINGLY ISOLATED POLITICALLY. HE HAS NOT

BEEN ABLE TO WIN CATHOLIC HIERARCHICAL SUPPORT NOR DOES HE HAVE ACTIVE COOPERATION OF ANY SIGNIFICANT GROUPS OR INDIVIDUALS. FR. THANH'S RECENT FORMATION OF THE PEOPLE'S REVOLUTIONARY FRONT --A HANDFUL OF UNINFLUENTIAL RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL FIGURES-- IL

ETRATES THE WEAKNESS OF HIS PRESENT POSITION. GIVEN UNLIKE-LIHOOD OF NEW SUPPORT FOR FR. THANH AND PROBABILITY THAT MILITARY SITUATION WILL MONOPOLIZE PEOPLE'S ATTENTION DURING COMING MONTHS, WE EXPECT THE PRIEST'S ROLE IN SOUTH VIETNAMESE POLITICS TO CONTINUE IN ITS ALREADY DIMINISHED FORM. NEVERTHELESS, LARGELY BECAUSE OF ECONOMIC CONDITIONS, THE ISSUE OF CORRUPTION ABOUT WHICH FR. THANH BUILT HIS MOVEMENT IS LIKELY TO CONTINUE TO BE A FACTOR OF SOME IMPORTANCE IN VIETNAMESE POLITICS, WHICH COULD WELL BE REFLECTED IN THE COMING ELECTIONS.

2. FR. THANH'S POPULARITY AND BACKING APPEAR TO HAVE SLIPPED BADLY SINCE MID-OCT WHEN THE PRIEST WAS CREDITED BY MANY WITH CAUSING CHANGE OF THREE CORPS COMMANDERS AND CABINET RESHUFFLE. IN PAST WEEKS THANH HAS MADE NO ATTEMPTS TO GATHER LARGE CROWDS, THOUGH HE HAS REPORTEDLY DISCUSSED POSSIBLE DEMONSTRATIONS WITH CLOSE ASSOCIATES. THANH REPORTEDLY TOLD FOLLOWERS, FOR EXAMPLE, THAT PACM-SPONSORED DEMONSTRATIONS SCHEDULED FOR DEC 29 IN HUE-DANANG WERE POSTPONED BECAUSE OF BAD WEATHER. THANH IS ALSO REPORTEDLY FEARFUL OF CAUSING DISORDERS DURING PRESENT HEIGHTENED COMMUNIST MILITARY ATTACKS, ALLEGEDLY FEARING THAT THIS WOULD ENABLE GOVT TO BRAND HIM AND HIS FOLLOWERS AS TRAITORS.

3. ALTHOUGH THANH HAS STAYED OFF STREETS, HE HAS CONTINUED TO SEARCH FOR NEW TACTICS TO DISCREDIT PRES THIEU, THOUGH LATELY HE SEEMS TO HAVE MODERATED AIM OF MAKING PRES RESIGN. THANH APPARENTLY PLANNED TO MAKE A STRONG BID FOR HIERARCHICAL SUPPORT AT BISHOPS' CONFERENCE SCHEDULED JAN 6-9, WHICH WAS HOWEVER POSTPONED. HE WAS REPORTEDLY PREPARING POSITION PAPERS FOR THOSE IN ATTENDANCE. THANH ALSO SEEMS TO HAVE HELPED PLAN RECENT SUIT CHARGING MRS. THIEU WITH PURCHASING PUBLIC LANDS IN BREACH OF CONSTITUTION, A PLOY SPONSORED BY MILITANT LAWYERS AND, WHATEVER ITS LEGAL MERITS, OBVIOUSLY DESIGNED TO EMBARRASS PRES POLITICALLY. AFTER FALL OF PHUOC LONG, THANH HEAVILY CRITICIZED COMMUNISTS, BUT LATER ALSO BLAMED GVN, CITING

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CORRUPTION IN ARMY GENERALLY AS CAUSE OF DEFEAT. FINALLY, THANH HAS GONE AHEAD WITH PLANS MADE PUBLIC EARLY DEC TO FORN FRONT COMPRISING RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL FIGURES CRITICAL OF GOVT (SEE BELOW). ALTHOUGH ALL THESE ACTIVITIES GIVEN WIDE AND FAITHFUL NEWSPAPER COVERAGE, NONE HAS AROUSED PUBLIC INTEREST.

4. MAIN REASON FOR FR. THANH'S LOSS OF MOMENTUM IS ALMOST TOTAL LACK OF SUPPORT AMONG CATHOLIC LEADERS AND FAILURE TO

ENLIST COOPERATION OF OTHER SIGNIFICANT GROUPS. SAIGON ARCH-BISHOP NGUYEN VAN BINH, WHO EARLIER MADE EVENHANDED AND AMBIGUOUS PUBLIC STATEMENTS THAT COULD BE READ AS ENCOURAGEMENT FOR PACM, TOLD US RECENTLY THAT HE CANNOT APPROVE ALL OF FR. THANH'S ACTIVITIES, THAT CLERICAL SUPPORT FOR THANH HAS DWINDLED (FROM AN ALREADY SMALL BASE), AND THAT HE CAN NOW SEE NO USEFUL PUBLIC ROLE FOR THANH. THREE BISHOPS WHOM PACM MEMBERS CITED AS SUPPORTERS (HUYNH VAN NGHI, AUXILIARY OF SAIGON; NGUYEN NGOC QUANG OF CAN THO; AND ARCHBISHOP NGUYEN KIM DIEN OF HUE) HAVE LATELY GENERALLY REFRAINED FROM STATEMENTS OR ACTIONS THAT COULD BE INTERPRETED AS FAVORING PACM. APOSTOLIC DELEGATION TELLS US POPE HIMSELF DISTURBED BY FR. THANH AND HAS TOLD THANH SO (PRESUMABLY THROUGH ARCHBISHOP BINH). REASONS FOR HIERARCHICAL DISPLEASURE OVER THANH'S ACTIVITIES SEEM TO INCLUDE FELLING THAT PRIESTS SHOULD NOT OVERTLY ENGAGE IN POLITICS, PARTICULARLY IN ACTIVIST MANNER TO WHICH THANH ADDICTED, AS WELL AS CONVICTION THAT VIETNAM WOULD BE ILL SERVED BY WEAKENING OR FALL OF PRES THIEU IN PRESENT CRITICAL PERIOD.

5. FR. THANH'S INABILITY TO GAIN SUPPORT OF CATHOLIC CHURCH HAS INFLUENCED HIS FAILURE TO ATTRACT BACKING OF OTHER GROUPS. ALTHOUGH AN QUANG ARE SPLIT AT MOMENT REGARDING THANH, EVEN TRI QUANG FACTION, WHICH HAS BEEN MORE FAVORABLY DISPOSED TOWARD THANH, IS NOT INCLINED TO COMMIT BUDDHIST CHURCH'S PRESTIGE TO ALLIANCE WITH MAN WHO LACKS SUPPORT OF HIS OWN ORGANIZATION. THIS IS NOT TO MENTION OTHER SERIOUS OBSTACLES TO CATHOLIC-AN QUANG COOPERATION (REF A). FR. THANH'S APPROACHES TO HOA HAO AND CAO DAI HAVE DRAWN POLITE BUT NON-COMMITTAL RESPONSES, AS APPARENTLY HAVE HIS ATTEMPTS TO ENLIST AID OF POLITICAL PARTIES LIKE VNQDD. THUS FR. THANH'S SUPPORT REDUCED TO THAT OF MARGINAL INDIVIDUALS FROM CAO DAI, HOA HAO AND VNQDD AS WELL AS SOME RADICAL OPPOSITION PEOPLE'S SOCIETY BLOC LOWER HOUSE DEPUTIES AND MILITANT LAWYER MEMBERS.

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AS BEFORE, THANH'S MOST VALUABLE BACKING COMES FROM PRESS, WHICH CONTINUES TO KEEP HIS INCREASINGLY INFREQUENT ACTIVITIES ON PAGE ONE.

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PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 OMB-01 DPW-01 EB-07 IO-10 /085 W

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 SAIGON 1231

DEPT PASS IMMEDIATE TO IBS/NCA

CINCPAC FOR POLAD

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6. ANOTHER REASON FOR FR. THANH'S DECLINING INFLUENCE IS
UPSURGE OF COMMUNIST MILITARY ATTACKS AND RESULTING POPULAR
CONCERN FOR IMMEDIATE FUTURE AND BELIEF THAT COUNTRY MUST BE
AS UNITED AS POSSIBLE DURING THIS PERIOD. ONE COLONEL WHO
EARLIER FAVORED FR. THANH'S ANTI-CORRUPTION EFFORTS TOLD US
RECENTLY PRIEST SHOULD STOP CRITICIZING GOVT FOR PRESENT SO
ALL ELEMENTS CAN TURN TOGETHER TO FACE COMMUNISTS.

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7. FINALLY, FR. THANH MAY HAVE ALSO HURT HIMSELF BY HIS
READINESS AND THAT OF HIS FOLLOWERS IN THE NATIONAL GROUP TO
ENGAGE IN EXTREME CHARGES SUCH AS THOSE IN THE NOW TOTALLY
DISCREDITED COMET PLAN FORGERY. THESE WERE GENERALLY NOT TAKEN
SERIOUSLY EVEN BY THE PRESS AND, AND BY ASSOCIATING HIMSELF WITH
THEM, FR. THANH REDUCED THE SERIOUSNESS WITH WHICH THE PUBLIC

TOOK HIS POSITION GENERALLY.

8. FR. THANH'S LATEST INITIATIVE IS PEOPLE'S REVOLUTIONARY FRONT (REF B), AN AMALGAM OF YOUNG ACTIVISTS LIKE LADY DEPUTY KIEU MONG THU AND OLD OPPOSITIONISTS LIKE HOA HAO PERSONALITY PHAN BA CAM. SINGLE AN QUANG ADHERENT IS FORMER HOA HAO AND APPEARS TO HAVE JOINED FR THANH WITHOUT OFFICIAL AN QUANG APPROVAL. OTHER MEMBERS HAVE NO VISIBLE FOLLOWING.

9. FR THANH'S INTENTIONS ARE, AT PRESENT, UNCLEAR THOUGH IT SEEMS PROBABLE THAT HE WILL CONTINUE TO PRESS HIS OPPOSITION TO PRES THIEU. HIS ROLE, HOWEVER, IS A DIMINISHED ONE.

10. NEVERTHELESS, UNDERLYING CONDITIONS WHICH MADE CORRUPTION AN IMPORTANT ISSUE REMAIN. THE ECONOMY REMAINS DISTRESSED, AND REAL INCOMES SEVERELY DEPRESSED. THIS IS, OF COURSE, DUE PARTLY TO WORLDWIDE CONDITIONS, GVN MANAGEMENT OF ITS ECONOMY ESPECIALLY IN VIEW OF WARTIME PROBLEMS HAVING GENERALLY BEEN GOOD. HOWEVER, THE AVERAGE VIETNAMESE UNDERSTANDABLY REACTS TO ECONOMIC HARDSHIP BY LOOKING FOR EXPLANATIONS (AND PERHAPS SCAPEGOATS) CLOSER TO HOME. IN THAT CONTEXT, CHARGES OF CORRUPTION REMAIN A SENSITIVE ISSUE. IN ADDITION, CONCERN OVER THE US MILITARY AID LEVELS AND THE RELIABILITY OF THE CONTINUING US COMMITMENT TO SUPPORT THE GVN REMAINS HIGH, LENDING SUPPORT TO THOSE WHO ARGUE THE NEED FOR STRONGER ACTION AGAINST CORRUPTION TO STRENGTHEN SVN IN ITS STRUGGLE WITH THE COMMUNISTS.

11. ADDITIONALLY, FR THANH LEAVES BEHIND HIM THE ISSUE OF THE PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT OF PRES THIEU IN CORRUPTION WHICH FR THANH, FOR THE FIRST TIME, MADE THE SUBJECT OF PUBLIC CHARGES. ALTHOUGH DENIED PUBLICLY BY THE PRESIDENT, SOME OF THE CHARGES ARE STILL BELIEVED BY MANY.

12. MOST VIETNAMESE DISAGREE WITH FR THANH'S CONFRONTATIONAL
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TACTICS, ESPECIALLY AT A TIME OF MILITARY PERIL. IF, HOWEVER, THE CURRENT SERIOUS MILITARY SITUATION SHOULD EASE LONG ENOUGH BEFORE THE 1975 ELECTIONS FOR ATTENTION TO AGAIN TURN TO CORRUPTION, IT WILL AGAIN BECOME AN IMPORTANT ISSUE. WE DOUBT, HOWEVER, THAT EVEN SO FR. THANH WOULD BE ABLE AGAIN TO PLAY SO IMPORTANT A ROLE AS HE DID IN THE LATTER HALF OF 1974.
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